

Christ's Zeal for God's House.

A SERMON

PREACHED AT THE OPENING OF THE SYNOD

OF THE

Presbyterian Church

OF THE

LOWER PROVINCES OF BRITISH NORTH AMERICA,

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A SERMON.

"For the zeal of thine house hath eaten me up; and the reproaches of them that reproached thee, have fallen upon me.—PSALMS lxix. 9.

This psalm is headed a psalm of David. He was the inspired penman of it, and, as he was also a typical character, it may readily be supposed that it sets forth some circumstances which may have had a counterpart in his personal history, and expresses some of the feelings which may have been working in his mind, amid the trials with which he was at times exercised. At the same time, it is very evident that a greater than David is here—that he who was at once David's Son and David's Lord is here to be contemplated; and, particularly, that, in the words of our text, we have presented to us the grand ruling principle which influenced him throughout the whole of that work for the accomplishment of which, although himself in the form of God and thinking it no robbery to be equal with God, he took upon himself the form of a servant, and being found in fashion as a man he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross. He it was who, addressing his Father, could, in the proper meaning of the words, declare, The zeal of thine house hath eaten me up; and who was so fully identified with God and his cause that the reproaches of them that reproached God fell upon him.

In the exposition of the words, we have to remark that the word which is here translated "zeal" implies that deep interest in any object—that strong affection of the mind towards it—which awakens—what is more directly expressed—zeal in promoting its well-being, jealousy in regard to any estrangement, and

indignation against whatsoever would wrong or injure it. The emotion is here represented as operating so strongly within him that it impairs his strength ; it consumes as it were his bodily substance ; and it urges him on to act in such a way, in vindication of the cause which is so dear to him, that the assaults which have their real bearing against the object in which he is so interested, are directed against him. Still further, the object of this special interest is said to be God's house, and it is on account of the zeal which he manifests in behalf of this object that he is exposed to the obloquy of which he complains ; the zeal of thine house hath eaten me up ; and the reproaches of them that reproached thee have fallen upon me.

As to the precise import of the expression "house of God" we are familiar with its application to the place where the people of God are accustomed to meet for his public worship ; and the generations under the Levitical Dispensation were no less familiar with its application, first to the tabernacle, and subsequently to the temple, to which they were accustomed to resort as the place where God shone forth from between the cherubim ; and where, in connexion with the typical sacrifices which were there presented, his people poured out their hearts before him as their covenant God and Father. In this application, however, we need to remember that God dwelleth not in temples made with men's hands. He himself says, The heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool : where is the house that ye build unto me ? and where is the place of my rest ? and he points out the true import of the words, when he adds, "but to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word." The heart of his people, whether viewed individually or collectively, is the true house of God. It is of his church whom he hath loved with an everlasting love, and whom he hath redeemed not with corruptible things such as silver and gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, that he says, "This is my rest for ever: here will I dwell; for I have desired it." The erection of this building is not yet completed. Some of its living stones have been prepared, and have been removed from this earth to the heavenly Jerusalem, others are in the course of being hewn and fitted for their intended place; and all in due time will occupy their appropriate position, when

at length the headstone shall be brought forth with shoutings, crying Grace, grace, unto it. But, in the mean time, as each is brought into vital connexion with the chief corner stone, he becomes actually a part of the true church or house of God, and the various ordinances and places of worship on earth which are rendered subservient to this end have a subordinate interest and importance, from the use which is thus made of them in building up those who are "an habitation of God through the Spirit." The application of the expression to the mere earthly fabric, where the professed worshippers of God meet for the purpose of offering up to him their homage and tribute of praise, and receiving spiritual edification, has been often so interpreted as to foster mere sensuous notions, and to blind men's minds to the higher meaning which it really conveys. Ritualism becomes the ruling idea, and men please themselves with the thought that God may be worshipped with men's hands, as though he had need of any thing. This, however, is not necessarily, nor is it always, the case. Where the true idea occupies the mind, the spirituality of God's worship is understood, and valued and enjoyed. The presence of God himself is realized. Outward ordinances are seen and are valued in the relation in which they stand to him. As instituted by divine authority, as accommodated to our present circumstances, and as the means in the believing use of which spiritual intercourse with God is to be maintained, the child of God prizes them, cheerfully submits to sacrifices that they may be upheld, and makes strenuous efforts that they may be enjoyed. With David he is ready to say, "O send out thy light and thy truth; let them lead me; let them bring me unto thy holy hill, and to thy tabernacles. Then will I go unto the altar of God, unto God my exceeding joy."

I. Let us then, in the first place, contemplate a little more closely the object set forth, according to the primary idea, in the expression "the house of God." It is the church of the living God, chosen in God's sovereign love from among the fallen family of mankind, when they were viewed as lying under the curse of a broken law, and weltering in the pollutions of sin. He who dwelleth in light which is inaccessible and full of glory, constructed the universe as a glorious temple for himself; and it does in most intelligible language declare his eternal power and

godhead. Whether, with the aid of the telescope, we endeavour to wander through the immensity of space, and to make ourselves acquainted with the numberless systems which it presents to our contemplation; or, with the aid of the microscope, we analyze the minute organisms that may be thus detected in the enjoyment of life and in full activity within the compass of a drop of water, we cannot fail to be struck with the manifested glory of him "who is wonderful in counsel and excellent in working."

Angels great in might, too, illustrate his character as the moral governor of the universe, while, in his dealings with some we mark his inflexible justice, and his burning wrath against sin; and in his dealings with others we see those overflowings of his bounty and goodness which draw forth the ceaseless praises of those who hasten to do his will. But besides all this, he has been pleased to select a peculiar people from the family of mankind, even the election of grace, to be as it were, the inner sanctuary of this temple, in his dealings with whom he might shew what divine love is, the sovereignty in which it is exercised, its forbearance with its objects, the blessedness which it contemplates for them, the sacrifices which it cheerfully makes in their behalf, the unwearied perseverance with which it prosecutes its aim, till, notwithstanding all the obstruction which it meets with, both from themselves and from others, it makes them objects on whom, in perfect consistency with the holiness of his own character, God can look with divine complacency, whom he can receive into closest intercourse with himself, and in whom he can take delight for ever, saying, "This is my rest for ever; here will I dwell; for I have desired it."

It is on the Son of His love that the Father has devolved the execution of this work, and it is in answer to the call thus addressed to Him that He says, "Lo, I come—I delight to do thy will, O my God." He knew that in bringing many sons unto glory, He Himself must be made perfect through sufferings. He knew what the sacrifice was by which the guilt of their multiplied transgressions was to be expiated. He knew the corruptions—the deep carnality of those whom He was to form into temples of the living God. He knew their waywardness, their proneness to err, the snares that would be laid for them, and the numerous assaults to which they would be exposed. He knew all this from

the beginning, but, concerned for the divine glory, bearing intense love for those who were thus entrusted to his care, that He might purify them unto Himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works, He set his face as a flint; and, for the joy that was set before Him, endured the cross, despising the shame. It was by His own blood that the covenant of peace was to be ratified. It was by the sacrifice of Himself that the demands of the divine law were to be answered, that divine justice was to be satisfied, and the guilt of his people forever removed; but the zeal of God's house, which was eating Him up, would not admit of his sparing Himself. He bears the curse upon the tree, and so removes it forever from his people; He goes down to the grave, but in doing so He consecrates it as a bed of rest to them. In due time, He bursts asunder the bands of death and the grave, and having ascended up on high, leading captivity captive, He hath obtained gifts for men, even for the rebellious, that God the Lord might dwell among them. Exalted at the right hand of God to be a Prince and a Saviour, to give repentance unto Israel and the forgiveness of sins, He draws them unto Himself as with the cords of a man and the bands of love. In his cross, he presents them with such views of the divine character as are fitted to secure their highest admiration and love, by the working of his Spirit he opens their hearts and prepares them for receiving right impressions from these views, he writes his laws upon their hearts, and the result is that they who but lately were stout-hearted and far from righteousness, saying in the height of their rebellion, Who is the Lord that we should obey his voice? now respond to the attractions of his love, find their happiness in the fulfilment of his will, and say in the sincerity of their hearts, Whom have we in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that we desire besides thee. Even already they are an habitation of God through the Spirit.

In contemplating with profound awe the divine glory blazing forth from the bush, which is not consumed, but in which God is pleased to dwell, we have to remember that the zeal of Christ for this house has its original ground in the love which he bears to God, whose servant he is, and his regard for the honour of Him whose house he is preparing. Acting, therefore, in behalf of God, this zeal shows itself in the care which he takes to render the

house a meet habitation for Him who is of purer eyes than to behold iniquity, who, being himself glorious in holiness, requires holiness in all who approach him. On the other hand, we have to look at this zeal as the expression also of the love which he bears to his people, and the interest which he takes in those who constitute the material of the house ; and, viewed in this relation, we see it still tending towards the same result, for it shows itself in the care which he takes to make them meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light, that they may bask in the smiles of him whose favour is life—whose loving-kindness is better than life. And what more appropriate temple, even for God who is love, than the hearts of those who, being washed and sanctified and justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God, now respond to his love, and with grateful hearts proclaim, “ Salvation to our God which sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb ? ” Or what bliss could be bestowed upon his people beyond what is implied in his own words, (John xvii. 22–24, “ And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them ; that they may be one, even as we are one : I in them and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one ; and that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them as thou hast loved me. Father, I will that they also whom thou hast given me be with me where I am ; that they may behold my glory, which thou hast given me : for thou lovest me before the foundation of the world ? ”

This fitting of the house as a residence for God implies also attention to symmetry of form, and the harmonious adjustment of parts to each other. God is a God of order. We his creatures are so constituted that pleasurable emotions are awakened in the contemplation of orderly arrangement, beautiful outline of figure, and nice adjustment of parts to the accomplishment of some useful end. Nor is this overlooked by him whose zeal of God’s house we are now considering. Observe the symmetry of the building which rises under his hand. Each stone has its appropriate place, is peculiarly fitted for the place which it is to occupy, and contributes its part to the beauty and the completeness of the entire temple. The time was when they who are now living stones, built on the true foundation stone, were stubborn and untractable under God’s dealings, presenting the utmost resistance to the

hand that was moulding and fashioning them for the manifestation of his glory, as the objects of his love. As depraved moral creatures, they were hateful, and they hated one another. But Christ's zeal of God's house has changed all this. He has taught them, as the children of God, not only to love their heavenly Father, but to love one another. They have learned the lesson, they have imbibed the spirit of him who said, (John xiii. 34, 35,) "A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another." Partakers of the spirit of Christ, they sympathize with him in his affections. They desire to have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but would rather reprove them. While here, they have precious opportunities with multitudes who need the same blessings, and may be won over to the same cause; and the spirit of Christ prompts them to address to such the invitation of Moses to Hobab, "Come thou with us, and we will do thee good: for the Lord hath spoken good concerning Israel." But however painful separation from former associates may be, where those whom they thus address remain wedded to the world, and decline to associate themselves with those who are travelling to a better country, they allow not themselves to be diverted from their heavenward progress. It is as a people who are to dwell alone, and not to be reckoned among the nations, that the Apostle Paul addresses the Church at Corinth, saying, (2 Cor. vi. 14-18,) "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, and will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty." It is true, these things are very inadequately apprehended and illustrated in their practice by the people of God while they are here, but the love of Christ contemplates them in all their extent and importance, and the zeal of Christ will bring them out into

full development. No spot, no imperfection, no maladjustment will he leave to disfigure the glorious edifice which he is rearing. The subjects of his charge are to be displayed as a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people, that they should show forth the praises of him who hath called them out of darkness into his marvellous light.

That was a dazzling glory which lit up the wilderness, when, in the camp of Israel, amid its assembled tribes, the tabernacle stood forth in all its completeness and beauty; when Aaron and his sons, with solemnized and elevated minds, dressed in their priestly attire, had laid the wood and the sacrifice upon the altar, when "the glory of the Lord appeared unto all the people, and there came a fire out from before the Lord, and consumed upon the altar the burnt offering and the fat; which when all the people saw, they shouted and fell upon their faces." Still more resplendent was the scene at Jerusalem, when Solomon had finished that temple for which his father David had made such magnificent preparations, and on which he himself had lavished so much of the wealth with which God had blessed him. "The house," we are told, "when it was in building, was built of stone made ready before it was brought thither: so that there was neither hammer, nor axe, nor any tool of iron, heard in the house while it was in building." So skilfully have the various parts been prepared beforehand, that they take up their appropriate place without noise or violence. The ark of God, which had hitherto dwelt in curtains, is at length brought into his place, "into the oracle of the house, to the most holy place, even under the wings of the cherubims." "And it came to pass, when the priests were come out of the holy place, that the cloud filled the house of the Lord, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud: for the glory of the Lord had filled the house of the Lord." Yet even all this has no glory, by reason of the glory that excelleth. There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth; and far more resplendent than what dazzled the eyes of the Israelites, is the glory that is lighted up in the soul of the sinner, when he responds to the call of him who says, "Behold, I stand at the door, and knock;" when the love of God is shed abroad in his heart, and when, in fulfilment of the promise of the heavenly stranger, "I will sup with him,

and he with me," he is made to feast on the fruits of divine love, and the Saviour himself rests in his love. While here, those who are to be living stones in the temple above require and receive that hewing and polishing which is to fit them for the honourable place which they are to occupy ; yet, although the discipline by which the character of God's people is to be formed is felt for the present to be not joyous but grievous, the power of divine grace sustains them, a sense of the divine presence comforts them, and the communications of divine love may be made to them in such abundance, as to fill them with a joy that is unspeakable and full of glory. But, if such a glory may at times illuminate this waste and howling wilderness, what heart can conceive the splendours of that more glorious scene, in preparation for which the zeal of Christ has been so earnestly directed, when the assembled multitudes whom he has washed from their sins in his own blood, whom he has adorned with the beauties of holiness with the working of his own spirit, shall, amid hosts of admiring angels, receive the welcome, "Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you?" The Captain of our salvation has fully acquitted himself of his wondrous undertaking, the palace of the Great King is now completed, and the Holy One himself says, "This is my rest for ever; here will I dwell; for I have desired it." "Lift up your heads, O ye gates; and be ye lifted up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in. Who is this King of glory? The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle. Lift up your heads, O ye gates; even lift them up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in. Who is this King of glory? The Lord of hosts, he is the King of glory."

II. In the second place, as to the instrumentality employed. It is the blood of Christ, offering himself as an atoning sacrifice, that has secured a title to the blessings which he thus dispenses to his people, and it is by the working of his Holy Spirit that these blessings are effectually applied. That all these blessings might, if it had so pleased God, have been made effectual without the intervention of human instrumentality, may be readily admitted. That to some they are made effectual without the use of what are called the ordinary means of grace, appears in the case of elect infants dying in infancy. The word of God, how-

ever, instructs us to look for the enjoyment of these blessings through the use of means which he has been pleased to institute, these yielding the result, not by any natural efficacy in themselves, but only through the blessing of Christ, and the working of his Holy Spirit. Dealing with men as rational beings, he sets before them in his word statements, expostulations, invitations, arguments and invitations, which are fitted to convince them of their guilt and danger, to draw them to himself as the only, and as an all-sufficient Saviour, and to induce them, in the exercise of faith in his name, to press on towards the mark for the prize of the high calling of God which is in Christ Jesus. He has enjoined it as a duty on each believer to make his light so shine before men, that others seeing his good works may be led to glorify his Father who is in heaven; and he invites each also, by brotherly admonition and counsel, as opportunity may be enjoyed, to become a worker together with himself in winning souls unto Christ, and in building them up in holiness and comfort through faith unto salvation. Besides all this, however, he has appointed his own office-bearers in the church whose official duty it is to preach the word; to be instant in season, out of season; to reprove, rebuke, exhort, with all long-suffering and doctrine. Whether called pastors or bishops, elders or overseers, their province is to feed the flock of God which is among them, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock. On the other hand, the charge to the people is, "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account; that they may do it with joy and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you."

Now, the interest which Christ has in his Father's house, renders him zealous as to these means which he employs in preparing it for the reception of its divine Master. Comparing the means employed under the Old Testament dispensation with those employed under the New, there is one aspect in which the difference is very marked. Before the atoning sacrifice was actually offered up, God communicated instruction as to salvation in the appointment of types and shadows. The law had a shadow of good things to come, but the body is Christ. Now,

the shadow has passed away, the substance itself having come. In the simple preaching of the word, in the dispensation of sacrament, Christ is evidently set forth, crucified among us. But there is another aspect in which both coincide, and it is this, that under the Old Testament and under the New alike, the ordinances are of divine authority. God himself prescribes the mode in which he is to be worshipped: Christ himself is to be recognized as Ruler in his own house. In considering the Old Testament mode of worship in the use of types, we see an illustration of the divine wisdom in appointing a form of service that was fitted to picture out to those who lived before the actual advent of the Saviour, the character and work of him in whom they were to repose their confidence. But independently of that, we have to look at it also as the system of worship which God had authoritatively enjoined for the time being, and in attendance on which his people were to look for his blessing. When he rebuked or chastised his people for corrupting his ordinances—for their departure from the prescribed mode of worship, it was not on the ground that what they had adopted was less fitted than what they had forsaken to picture out the coming Saviour; but because it was what he had not commanded. He is a jealous God, and he will not permit the devices of men to supersede the requirements of his law. No doubt it was setting up the wisdom of men in opposition to that of God; but what he dwelt upon was that they were doing what he had not commanded; and, in like manner, our Saviour charged the Jews of his day with rejecting the commandment of God, that they might keep their own tradition. It is upon his authority, therefore, that those who profess to be his people are required to separate themselves, as a visible organized society distinct from mere secular associations. It is his authority that has appointed the ordinances of divine worship under the New Testament dispensation, as well as under the Old. It is he who has given pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ. It is he who has invested the office-bearers in this his visible Church, with authority to teach and to rule, to bind and to loose, to admit or to exclude; not indeed according to their own pleasure or caprice, but according to the rules which he has himself laid down. And although the society

which is thus formed contains an admixture of tares with the wheat, resembles what is accomplished when a net that has been cast into the sea brings to land fishes, some good and some bad ; yet are there obvious violations of the rules of Christ's house which must be dealt with in the use of that discipline which he has prescribed. The unruly must be warned, and the obstinate transgressor must be excluded from a company which his presence and example might contaminate.

The visible body thus organized, and professing faith in Christ, notwithstanding the admixtures which have been noticed, is called "God's husbandry—God's building." To guard, however, against the delusion of imagining that all who get a place in this building will be entitled to a place in the temple above, we are reminded, as in the third chapter of the First Epistle to the Corinthians, that, as it is not the prerogative of even the most faithful minister of the Word to search and to know the heart of his fellow-men, so, even where Christ is preached, or laid, as the only foundation, there may be admitted into the visible Church, or placed in outward connexion with that foundation, not only "gold, silver, precious stones;" but also, however disguised, what is no better than "wood, hay, stubble." In receiving them into the visible Church, the minister of the Word may have fondly imagined that he was instrumental in building so many living stones on the tried foundation that had been laid, and that for him was being prepared the reward promised to him who turns many to righteousness. That passage informs us, however, that there is a day when all will be subjected to a trial searching and testing as by fire; that then, if any man's work which he hath endeavoured to build on the true foundation abide, he shall receive a reward; that, on the other hand, if any man's work shall be burned, there is, of course, no title to the reward, he shall suffer loss. Nay, the builder himself must be subjected to the same test; and whatever may become of his work, he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire.

Whatever subordinate agency may be employed here, throughout the whole of the process, the great Master Builder most diligently superintends the work, and marks with interest the progress. In his zeal of God's house, he views with jealousy whatever might interrupt or mar that progress; and his indignation is hot against those who would set themselves in opposition to it.

All such will find Jerusalem to be a burdensome stone. Notwithstanding the admixture of heterogeneous materials, the visible Church is eminently God's house upon earth, presented indeed in a seat of war, in which the conflict with sin rages both within and without; but still, the Church of the living God. It is set forth as a witness for God, bound to follow after holiness, without which no man shall see God, to assert the truth which he hath revealed, to maintain the purity of worship which he hath instituted, and in the exercise of that authority with which he hath invested the office-bearers, to apply discipline to the disorderly, and even to cast out those who are the open contemners of his laws. Different portions of his visible Church may be found in different stages of advancement, and following out with different degrees of intelligence and faithfulness the instructions of his Word: and they who feel how much they themselves need the exercise of forbearance, will rejoice to see that God is graciously pleased to bless an instrumentality that exhibits much of human infirmity. Still, each is bound to hold fast that which he hath, and to carry out faithfully in practice what he himself has been brought to apprehend of divine truth. It is not the varying opinions of men, but the inspired Word of God that must be our rule as to how we ought to behave ourselves in the house of God, which is the Church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth. With respect to that, we have laid upon us the same charge which the Apostle Paul addressed to Timothy, (1 Tim. vi. 13-16,) "I give thee charge in the sight of God, who quickeneth all things, and before Christ Jesus, who before Pontius Pilate witnessed a good confession; that thou keep this commandment without spot, unrebukable, until the appearing of the Lord Jesus Christ: which in his times he shall show, who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords; who only hath immortality dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen, nor can see: to whom be honour and power everlasting. Amen."

Fathers and Brethren, such are the high and the holy objects for the promotion of which we now meet together. If we sympathise with Christ in his zeal, we may expect that the reproaches of them that reproached him will fall upon us. We may be reviled by such as reviled him. We may be resisted by the followers of

that strong one who is to be driven from his usurped possession. But it is a high privilege to which we are called, when it is given to us not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for his sake. He will uphold those who submit to his authority, and faithfully follow out the instructions of his Word; and, notwithstanding the opposition that he meets with, he shall bring forth judgment unto victory—he shall see of the travail of his soul and be satisfied.

But, Fathers and Brethren, we have also to remember the responsibility under which we act. They especially must be holy who bear the vessels of the sanctuary—who would take part in the management of the affairs of Christ's house. His zeal of God's house is not less now than when he drove out the buyers and sellers from the temple at Jerusalem; or when his anger burned against Nadab and Abihu, who presumed to burn the incense of the sanctuary with strange fire before the Lord, which he commanded them not. Let us in the first place take heed to ourselves, and then we shall enjoy God's blessing in taking heed to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made us overseers, to feed the Church of God which he hath purchased with his own blood.

And do you, my friends, a portion of the flock thus committed to our care, also keep in view the object of a Church organization. It is for the edifying of the body of Christ. Be not satisfied with any thing short of a personal interest in the Saviour. Let your prayers ascend for spiritual blessings in behalf of yourselves, your pastors, and the whole flock; and thus striving together, speaking the truth in love, we shall "grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: from whom the whole body fitly joined together, and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love."